Sabeen Mahmud

Creative Karachi

Establishing an Arts & Culture Center for the World's Most Rapidly Growing City

Innovations Case Narrative:
PeaceNiche and The Second Floor

Twenty-four years ago, I fell in love for the first time—with a Macintosh Plus computer. It had a tiny 9-inch screen, an 8-MHz processor, 1 MB of RAM, and no hard disk. It was the computer for "the rest of us," and it profoundly altered the course of my life. As Steve Jobs said, you can only connect the dots looking backwards, and I now realize how significant the Mac was in shaping my anti-establishment, anti-war, pro-freedom worldview. The Mac became a portal into myriad subcultures, from beat poetry to the Yippies, fueled by the dark meanderings of Pink Floyd. My mother, Mahenaz, stoked my socialist tendencies, and my mentor Zak, who was in attendance at Woodstock, introduced me to Lenny Bruce, Abbie Hoffman, *The Whole Earth Catalog,* and a host of revolutionary Urdu poets. I slipped into a solitary stupor for a couple of years and taught myself programming and the essentials of graphic design, while living the counterculture dream in my head. Who needed people when one had MacPaint, MacDraw, MacWrite, Tetris, Pink Floyd, and Party Slims Chili Chips (Karachi's equivalent of Jolt Cola)?

I spent my college years, the early 1990s, valiantly trying to drop out. Just about everything, however mundane, was more exciting than the stifling confines of a classroom. Around this time, I started developing a conscious, virulent distaste for traditional education. I wrote a lot of bad poetry and started getting involved in protest movements. Whenever I returned to Karachi from Lahore, I'd run straight to Solutions Unlimited, an Apple Computer dealership where I learned how to solder wires, install hard drives, and swap motherboards, for intellectual respite and rejuvenation. Zak would further corrupt my mind and make me believe that it was entirely possible to recreate the hippie movement of the 1960s in Karachi.

After college, I spent the next several years developing multimedia products and exploring the intersection between technology, art, literature, and music. The dotcom boom brought with it a deranged sense of empowerment that led me to

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believe that anarchism could work and that the Internet would enable us to topple corporations. Then many bubbles burst and reality set in. I built websites by day and picketed by night. But, by the mid-2000s, consumed by my awareness of the military-industrial complex, I was getting increasingly restless. Karachi was a cesspool of chaos, "clean-up operations," and fragmentation. People were leaving in droves, our politicians continued to make promises they had no intention of fulfilling, and the country lurched from one military dictatorship to another. People had become apathetic and a sense of hopelessness engulfed the city. All my friends had gone to university abroad and had chosen not to return. I began to wonder why I was wasting "the best years of my life" helping behemoths like Unilever and Shell peddle toothpaste and motor oil. It was a depressing time and I experienced my first existential crisis. I accepted an offer to move to Delhi to oversee web strategy for a public interest journalism initiative.

How could we become agents of social change if our theater practitioners had no rehearsal spaces, if our underground musicians had no venues to perform in, if our emerging artists had nowhere to hang their work? How could creative dissidents even learn of each other's existence, let alone build and cultivate a community, without physical spaces where people could talk politics?

BEGINNING TO DREAM

While waiting for my visa to come through, I started fantasizing about creating a public space for free speech and creative expression. I had long conversations with myself: How could we become agents of social change if our theater practitioners had no rehearsal spaces, if our underground musicians had no venues to perform in, if our emerging artists had nowhere to hang their work? How could creative dissidents even learn of each other's existence, let alone build and cultivate a community, without physical spaces where people could talk politics? In fact, years of military rule, terrible violence, and a range of other events had stripped people of their political will and the desire to be the change they wished to see. I had grown up hearing stories about Pakistan's teahouses where poets and revolutionaries would gather, and I had seen countless photographs of inspirational leaders from

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the women's movement being tear-gassed for demanding their rights. What would it take to create a space that espoused liberal, secular values through its programming and projects? I wondered if I could create a minuscule postmodern hippie outpost, a safe haven for artists, musicians, writers, poets, activists, and thinkers—essentially anyone who wanted to escape the relentless tyranny of the city for a little while. If I built it, would anyone come?

The next day, the conversation moved out of my head and onto a whiteboard. I sketched out a fantasy space: a large open courtyard for theatre, dance, spoken word and improv performances, readings, talks, and film screenings. All around the courtyard would be smaller rooms for workshops and events, a bookshop, a coffeehouse, studios for artists and designers, shops for artisans to showcase their work, and a bed and breakfast that would pull in some income to subsidize operations. With Rs. 12,000 (about USD$113) in my bank account, I asked my accountant to run across to a real estate agent and check out the cost of land. He came back with a ridiculously astronomical figure with dozens of zeroes. I was paralyzed into inaction for months. Ignoring the wisdom of my elders, I remained adamant about creating an ambitious project that would include all of the components above; without them it would be pointless. I blame Bruce Springsteen and his lyrics, "I want it all or nothing at all."

Years of military rule, terrible violence, and a range of other events had stripped people of their political will and the desire to be the change they wished to see.

Toward the end of 2006, I was walking up the stairs to my office and the penny dropped. I realized that the grownups were right: I should start small, test, and iterate. However, even the tiniest of ventures needs money, especially one involving bricks and mortar. I have a terrible relationship with money and my biggest fear has always been falling in love with an investment banker. I have lived by Buckminster Fuller's aphorism, "You have to decide whether you want to make money or make sense, because the two are mutually exclusive." As a result, despite being the COO and cofounder of a well-respected technology/design company with great blue-chip clients, I had a pittance in my bank account. Zak once said, "It doesn't matter if you can't swim—jump right in but just make sure the pool has water." My mother has also consistently encouraged reckless behavior. So, trained by those key people in my life, I took a leap of faith.

My office was on the second floor of a building in what is commonly referred to as a posh area of Karachi. We had recently vacated a space on the same floor and I figured it would make sense to start from there. It had 1,800 square feet, an open(ish) plan, and two toilets. I had narrowed down my long list of desirables to a combined café, bookshop, and performance space. I placed calls to the landlord,

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a coffee machine dealer, a book publisher, a carpenter, and a mason. The landlord said the space was still available and we made a verbal agreement on the phone. The coffee machine dealer said, come over in an hour's time. The mason showed up 15 minutes later, and I set up a meeting with the publisher for the next day.

I truly respect people who have the patience and ability to make business plans, but I am not blessed with either attribute. So, the next morning I told the mason to knock down a wall and showed the carpenter my designs for tables and chairs. Using OmniOutliner, I produced a detailed plan. Game on.

The next morning, I suddenly remembered my Delhi plan—I had decided to leave the country. Another moment of crisis. But a very short one. Home to over 21 million people, Karachi has earned the dubious honor of being the world's most dangerous megacity. Wracked by violence and crime, it is governed by multiple realities and unknown overlords. It is dysfunctional, messy, incredible, and insanely loveable—and I cannot bear the thought of living anywhere else. With that decision out of the way, I inconveniently remembered that I had no money whatsoever and had just ordered a coffee machine, a coffee grinder, and lots of pretty pine furniture.

FINDING SOME MONEY

I had decided that this little social enterprise in the making was to be a not-for-profit venture. I took this decision because I wanted to make meaning, not money. I recognize that making money is critical for any endeavor to succeed and survive, but maximizing profits and creating value for shareholders were hardly matters of interest to me. With the nonprofit model, raising capital from investors was not an option. My mother is a teacher and works for a nonprofit organization; we had no savings, no land, and no jewelry to sell. Banks don't give loans to people like us, and most people couldn't comprehend exactly what I was trying to do anyway.

A few months ago, my maternal uncle, based in London, had sent over Rs. 1,000,000 (about USD$9,400) for my grandmother's health fund. He advised us to stow it away for a rainy day. With no money on the horizon and immediate bills to be paid, I decided to take the cash and run. I told my grandmother what I was planning to do and assured her that if she fell ill, we'd give her a triple shot of espresso that would either cure her or kill her. After a jolly giggle, she gave me her blessings. The following year, she suffered a heart attack and needed a quadruple bypass, and then had colon cancer. "It never rains around here . . ."

Entrepreneurship involves a great deal of fire fighting. You lurch from one disaster to the next, and in between you try to get some work done and do your best to remember the cause for which you decided to give up any semblance of normalcy in your life—with a straight face. Also, if you're nitpicky about details—and I am a pixel pusher to the point of neurosis—you find yourself losing sight of the forest for the trees. This really used to frustrate me, but I learned to remind myself that forests would not exist without the trees. You just have to pull the all-nighters, find

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time for big-picture thinking, sweat the small stuff, and try not to feel sorry for yourself as you keep signing checks.

In January 2007, we christened The Second Floor (T2F), and I got to work on the legalese. Although it was tempting to skip this step, I wanted to go through all the proper procedures of registering a nonprofit organization. When I sat down to work on the Memorandum of Association and the Articles of Association, I realized this was a time for big-picture thinking. After some quick consultations and brainstorming, PeaceNiche was born, and T2F became its first project. As "intellectual poverty alleviation" lies at the heart of PeaceNiche's mission, we wrote up the articles in a way that would let us add projects in the areas of arts and culture, science and technology, and advocacy, as we expanded. PeaceNiche was finally registered on April 21, 2007, under the arcane Societies Act of 1860.

The target launch date for T2F was set for May 2007. In February 2007, I locked myself in a room for two days and designed the logo, branding guidelines, a concept note for public consumption, and a single-page website with an opt-in mailing list form. I sent the concept note to family and friends and asked them to pass it along if they liked the idea. The website also went live and—to my great surprise—people started to sign up. In the meantime, I was frantically reading up on cafés, bookshops, art galleries, and event programming while scavenging for cash on a daily basis, and trying not to murder our wonderful carpenter, who, despite living for decades in Karachi, only speaks an unintelligible dialect of Punjabi. The health fund money was long gone. My mother and a dear family friend wrote some checks, and I reached out to my uncle again. I also wrote a do-or-die letter to the founder of the South Asia Foundation, a wonderful, kindly gentleman whose son got very, very rich just before the dotcom bubble burst. A remittance for USD$10,000 came through the next day.

DECORATING—AND OPENING—ON A SHOESTRING

We spent a lot more money than regular business-minded folk would deem necessary on the look and feel of the space. We discovered a wonderful young artist (who would commit suicide three years later) and commissioned him to paint a mural. Here is an extract of a speech I made at his retrospective exhibition last year:

> When I was setting up The Second Floor, I didn't want mundane paintings or posters on the walls. A friend suggested I meet this mad chap, Asim Butt, who had been running around painting elaborate murals outside shrines. I called him and requested an appointment. This was in March 2007.

As I explained the idea of T2F to Asim, he got excited but was skeptical. We convinced him to do a mural for us and he brought out his sketch book and started talking animatedly about a concept he was working on. He said it would take three months to complete, and I said, but we're opening mid-May and this just has

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to happen. So he said, these things take time, let me give you a painting to hang on the wall. I said "No, why don't you just start scribbling some ideas on the wall and we can say it's a work in progress—it's under construction—and you can keep working on it, even after we open?" He was noncommittal.

The next day, Asim came to see the space. I will never forget how he jumped up and down and clapped his hands gleefully. He was like a child—pure and uninhibited. I imagine the sight of those empty walls drove him into a state of ecstasy. He asked for the keys so he could work at night. Each morning, we'd come in and Asim would have encroached, just a little more, into areas he was not supposed to touch. He'd then jump up and down and talk our ears off about what he'd added and why. Sometimes he drove us to distraction. He threw a fit one day and demanded that we remove the speaker wires because they were getting in the way of a puff of smoke that he'd painted just below the ceiling. I was exasperated and wanted to murder him.

T2F opened its doors to the public without any fanfare or glitzy launch parties for celebrities and the press. I had conducted no research and done no target market segmentation. . . . I could not stomach focus groups and just went with intuition and the fervent hope that there were at least a few more people like me. It was a scary time.

Thanks to Asim's boundless energy, the mural, which he named "Class," was completed before we opened our doors, and it became an intrinsic part of T2F's identity.

T2F's first emerging artist showcase, School's Out, was a scathing indictment of the traditional education system, by Maryam Asif, a graphic design graduate. It presented a stark visual contrast to Asim Butt's stunning mural that stretched across three walls, and I was thrilled to see my personal politics reflected in the space on opening day.

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The next few months really took their toll. I was on my feet for a minimum of 20 hours a day, grappling with training staff, graphic design tasks, writing, press interviews, event programming, administrative chores, accounting, and the eternal

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lack of cash in hand. Oh, and responding to the bewildered people who'd walk through the doors and ask what on earth this place was. Unlike most NGOs in Pakistan, we had revenue streams: the café, bookshop, merchandise, and art sales. However, we intentionally kept our prices low, in keeping with our philosophy. We weren't earning enough to make ends meet and all the early injections of cash were long gone—spent on capital expenses and the first couple months of operating expenses. It was time to bootstrap, and all I had at my disposal were seven credit cards. I proceeded to max them out and got through the next few weeks.

In addition to general expenses, the biggest financial drain was renting a generator and buying diesel to keep it running full time. Karachi is hostage to constant power failures. Being on the second floor meant people would invariably use the lift and we didn't want anyone getting stuck midway. So we were forced to run the generator all the time to ensure uninterrupted electricity. Ideally I would have leased a generator, but no one was willing to underwrite a lease to a non-profit startup. On the home front, my relationship with my mother was severely challenged. I typically got home at 1:00 AM, leaving us no time to converse or for me to deal with any responsibilities. I was not earning a penny, couldn't contribute financially, and wasn't even around to say hello, let alone help with anything. Somehow we got through those dark days. If it weren't for my mother's uncompromising support, I would have crumbled and given up.

During those months, we had our first open mic, our first Urdu poetry reading, our first science talk, our first film screening, and our first press review. Version 1.0 was up and running. People came. A community began to develop. The lack of money was a nagging constant, but it taught us how to do a lot with very little, to stretch our pennies, and to stay lean and hungry. In those early days, my mother and Zak were instrumental in teaching me how to develop a thick skin. A lot of people questioned my motives and agenda and wrote nasty blog posts. I'd cry. A lot. But I learned to ignore the noise and lived by Guy Kawasaki's teaching, "Don't let the bozos grind you down."

SHOCK

By 2009, we were picking up speed, the brand had grown and gained respect, and I was feeling a little more in control, relatively speaking. I still hadn't earned a penny and was working nights to pay my bills—but more about that later. Only days after we'd celebrated the New Year, I got the phone call that resulted in the following blog post:

> Dear PeaceNiche and T2F Community,
>
> 612 days ago T2F opened its doors to you. Our vision was lofty, and frankly, a bit mad. Who would walk up to the second floor of an office building on Khayaban-e-Ittehad to listen to a poet rambling on about revolution, or a scientist arguing in favour of evolution, or some kids playing drums? Well, as it turns out, thousands of people . . .

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In these 612 days minus Mondays, our tiny space has hosted over 150 events featuring thought leaders, artists, poets, musicians, scientists, magicians, writers, philosophers, dancers, actors, lawyers, and activists. Hundreds of you have written in to tell us how much T2F means to you and to the city of Karachi. Every e-mail, snail mail, text message, and Facebook Wall post that you have sent has given us the strength to carry on. Many of you have supported us through your donations and even helped us replace our stolen Mac. We can't thank you enough.

By now you are probably thinking that we're closing down and that this is a goodbye note. No such luck :D But there is some critical news that we need to share with you.

We called our landlord the day-before-yesterday, to ask him when he was going to get the lift fixed. He was non-committal and then said he wanted us to vacate the premises. The initial shock was soon replaced by calm determination and optimism.

At yesterday's literary event, we broke the news. Practically everyone came forward to express solidarity and support. Some of you graciously volunteered your offices, houses, gardens, and basements for us to conduct our events till we find our own space. And one of you, a volunteer/student/journalist, kick-started the donation drive with a contribution of Rs. 5,000. Thank you Batool.

So, here's the plan:

We plan to vacate the current premises by early February 2009. We have already been offered several temporary spaces to conduct our events until such time that we find a permanent venue. We would like to move to a new space—a home we can call our own—as soon as possible. It's going to be tough and we can't do it alone. We simply don't have the funds. As you know, PeaceNiche is a non-profit organization and we have meager funding. We are reaching out to you to help us in any way that you can. We will be writing to you again with specific requirements, but in the meanwhile, please spread the word about our need for a permanent, rent-free space so that we can get up and running without losing momentum.

Over the next few days, please come to T2F as often as possible—we'll recreate the magic wherever we go but this is where it all started. Thank you Karachi for believing in us.

Peace/Sabeen

17th January 2009

Responses started flowing in immediately. Here are a few of them:

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> We have seen how much love and support T2F has created in the community for what it offers and the generosity with which it does this. We are here, you are not alone, and we will help in any way we can.
>
> —Shazia Mohamed

> You know there had to come a situation when T2F became as public as it is and the responsibility was shared with all the people whom T2F has served so proactively. This situation has helped shake up the supporters and given the people the opportunity to work together—however each may—to preserve and grow a cultural institution that citizens have set up for citizens. The only way, then, is forward.
>
> —Ramla Akhtar

> T2F is an incomparable asset for Karachi. It will not only survive this little setback, but thrive. There's no better time for Karachites, here and abroad, to come together and support a priceless institution.
>
> —Shahjahan Chaudhary

> I feel your enthusiasm and commitment, your cause is so great that it cannot simply be abandoned. I will reach out to my friends, a few sponsors I know.
>
> —Zunaira Sohag

> The love you all have shown me and my work has been a source of encouragement and affirmation....T2F has provided the city with a much needed nerve centre of artistic activity and debate and I am heartened by your resolve to proliferate your agenda beyond the venue at Ittehad.
>
> —Asim Butt

> It's rare to come across a place in Karachi which has so much to offer and to meet people who contribute towards society selflessly and intellectually! Even though we haven't contributed in any way so far we would love to help in any way possible! I'm convinced that the matter will get resolved in due time and our support is always there!
>
> —Rania Ghangro

A week later, I received an email from someone who'd seen a news report in Pakistan's leading English language daily about the landlord's notice. He said he had a space he'd like to show me. PeaceNiche was now in debt and I was at my lowest ebb. I had no idea what kind of rent the gentleman had in mind, but I went along anyway to have a look. Close to our original premises, it was a five-story building under construction. Only two floors had been built thus far. It was in an interesting lane flanked by tailor shops and estate agencies. The ground floor was a large open space with a lot of promise. I asked about the first floor and the owner said, go up and have a look. By now I had started imagining T2F spread over two floors. Till now, given that everything had to happen in the same space, we had to move furniture around every day and suspend café operations during events. Spreading out over two floors would let us increase both sales and efficiency.

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I wandered upstairs by myself and stood there for a minute, imagining the possibilities. I knew that whatever rent he would ask for would not be an option considering our dire financial situation. I came back down and asked him what he had in mind. He nonchalantly said, "50 paisa for the ground floor and 50 paisa for the first floor"—a grand total of Rs. 12 (about US 11 cents) in annual rent. I was dumbfounded. After sputtering and stammering unintelligibly, I thanked him in tears and said I'd go home and respond via email. I was too emotionally charged to speak coherently. I went home and then, like a typical Pakistani conspiracy theorist, wondered why this gentleman, who prefers to remain anonymous, was doing this. What did he want? What were his motivations? Did he have some kind of agenda he'd try to fulfill through T2F? Anyhow, I quickly stopped theorizing and shared an update with the community.

On April 1, 2009, we vacated T2F 1.0 and set plans in motion for the next version.

HARD CHOICES PAY OFF

Thus began the next phase of our journey. It took what felt like forever to get up and running again. Naturally the building had to be completed before we could move in; that took nearly a year. During that time, we not only retained our entire team but also took on a couple of new people, and I started taking out personal loans. In fact I was getting loans to pay off other loans. My mother asked me what the hell I was doing. I told her I was gambling. This time I was determined to lease a generator. It took three months, but it got done, somehow. I can't fathom how this reputable company agreed to lease a piece of equipment worth Rs. 1,700,000 (about USD$16,000) to a nonfunctioning nonprofit organization with no office and mounting debt. To provide a sense of the ongoing daily dramas from those heady days, here is an extract from a letter I sent out:

> The most dreaded question I am unable to answer these days is "When exactly is T2F reopening?" It's heartwarming that so many people want T2F back in their lives and it's aggravating beyond belief to not be able to give them a straight answer. If you've ever built a house or an office, you'll know why.
>
> In May, I said, "Oh, definitely June." In June, I realized the enormity of the task at hand and said, "July for sure." Well, July isn't over yet, but it will be, all too soon. I now tell people, "As soon as there is electricity and I can guarantee that cement blocks won't fall on your head." Naturally the next question is, "So when do you think that will be?"
>
> Unfortunately, this particular situation involves painters, masons, air conditioner installers, plumbers, carpenters, and electricians, each of whom move to the beat of a different drummer, and no, not in a nice, esoteric way. Adding to the trauma is the fact that the building we're moving into has still not been granted an electrical connection by our

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> favorite utility company. So each time someone needs to drill a hole in the wall, they need to rent a generator!
>
> It became fairly apparent, somewhere in June, that we would not be blessed with an electrical connection any time soon. I sent out an email asking for donations to help us buy a generator. Thanks to some absolutely wonderful individuals, we were able to raise enough money for a down payment on the generator. We were several lakhs short of being able to buy one, so I had to sign my life over to the leasing firm.
>
> The good news is that we got the lease and the generator will hopefully be installed by next week. The painters have started painting and the carpenter is doing the best he can in the dark. Thanks to the generosity of our amazing donor, we have not one, but two floors of space. Events will now be held on the ground floor and no musician will ever have to lug equipment up two flights of stairs again, ever! Our upcoming project, Faraar—a playground for creative expression—is also downstairs and we are super excited about our first exhibition featuring three talented young artists. Music and dance classes will also be held downstairs. The coffeehouse will be upstairs (during events, coffee will also be available from a counter downstairs), along with offices for us and some new spaces. We now have a dedicated conference room that we will rent out for meetings, and a co-working studio to let out to aspiring entrepreneurs, writers, designers, researchers—well really anyone who needs a quiet, furnished space with access to various forms of mentoring, free wifi and a funky vibe.
>
> Other exciting new PeaceNiche projects are brewing and we'll share them with you very soon. Right now, the focus is to get T2F 2.0 up and running. The last four months have been very tough but we're too pig-headed to let adversity get in the way. There are tons of things that need to get done but once the bare essentials are in place, we're going to throw the doors open for beta testing. Uhhhh, don't ask when exactly!!! Sometime in August. Yes, this year!

We finally moved in December of 2009! Fending off financial, mental, and emotional crises, I felt I was in the throes of a near-death experience. But we had such a beautiful space that it was all truly worthwhile. Three sets of artists had painted murals (http://www.t2f.biz/an-ode-to-our-artists/), everything looked fresh and exciting, and there was a palpable energy all around us. We had a little party for close friends and supporters and just got back to work again as if nothing had changed.

By mid 2010, I realized I couldn't go on any longer without a salary. I was putting in 15 hours a day on PeaceNiche's various initiatives and continued to work nights to pay my own bills. I had constant vertigo and eventually my doctor prescribed antidepressants and told me to go on a holiday. I had a valid visa for the

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United States but no ticket money. I sold my iPad on Facebook and my mother put in the rest of the cash. I went to New York and collapsed on a friend's sofa and slept for three days. Eventually he said, enough is enough, we're going out. We ended up on the roof of Gawker Media owner Nick Denton's house and I met a bunch of talented, passionate people and had some greatly energizing conversations. The next day I got a long lecture from my friend, who validated my work and reminded me that I'd created something valuable and should get over my anxiety about asking people for financial support. We worked out a yearly budget, including a salary for me, and I went off to see someone at the Open Society Foundation's headquarters. Eventually we received an institutional grant from the foundation that saw us through the next year. During that time, I was able to hire more people, including a proper accountant and a tax/legal consultant, and I started drawing a salary. That meant I could get some sleep at night. Because we generate 50 percent of our operating budget through a variety of revenue streams, we were able to stretch the grant out over a two-year period.

Having a bit of money in the bank also meant I could stop fretting about going belly up on the first of every month. For the first time in years, I could take a breath and focus on programming and innovation. Observing how people interact with speakers, performers, and each other when they're at T2F has taught me a great deal about how much built spaces affect communication and engagement. The team and I love to tinker with what we call "the physical"; we try to create fresh experiences just by playing around with what we have. We want to evoke curiosity when people walk through the door, so they will wander around and discover things for themselves. That's why the bathroom door features a poem in Urdu by Faiz Ahmed Faiz rather than a standard toilet sign.

A great deal of our programming is proactive and responsive to current affairs, visitors to the city, and the serendipitous discovery of awesome people and ideas. We also operate several specific, recurring programs. First Fridays: Open Mic Night and LitLab: Literary Open Mic provide platforms for emerging musicians, comedians, poets, and writers to showcase their talent. Our open mics feature encouraging hosts who are able to connect with audiences and coax people to come up on stage. Over the course of an evening, scores of shy people make their way across the room and ask to be slotted in. Several people who have performed at our open mics have been highlighted on radio and television shows, have forged partnerships, and have started bands with people they've met at T2F.

Our Philosophy 101 series, which seeks to introduce the works of great philosophers to lay audiences, regularly draws a diverse crowd, ranging from architects and environmentalists to musicians and doctors. Our Science Ka Adda series pulls in a similar mix; people typically sit around for hours, heatedly discussing evolution, the Large Hadron Collider, and the possibility of life on Mars. Every Saturday afternoon, the people who walk through our doors are treated to the exquisite reverberations of Ustad Khurshid Hussain's tabla; anyone can sit at his feet and listen to his wonderful tales and audit a lesson.

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On Sunday afternoons, T2F is abuzz with the sound of young children, who are enthralled by the enactment of folk tales and oral storytelling by a dynamic group called ToffeeTV. Zambeel Dramatic Readings is another troupe with whom we regularly collaborate; they captivate audiences with dramatic renditions of texts from Urdu literature. They recently celebrated their second birthday and graciously acknowledged us:

> Sabeen Mahmud at T2F . . . has from the very beginning shown her confidence in us and supported us in every way. We have enjoyed every moment of performing at T2F and look forward to many more such occasions. A special thanks to Chaand at T2F who has always organized the pre-production details with complete efficiency. We cannot do without you Chaand!

Another key feature of our programming is the preservation of South Asian classical music traditions. From qavvaali to sitar performances, our Traditional Music Preservation series features renowned and upcoming artistes who are trained in the centuries-old Eastern classical and devotional styles of music, keeping alive our incredible heritage while cultivating new audiences.

One of our quarterly features is the Jumma Hafta Art Bazaar (JHAB), which aims to cultivate a new and fresh viewership for the arts. JHAB is a platform for established and emerging artists to get to know each other; interact with art enthusiasts, collectors, and students; and sell their artwork in a vibrant, approachable community setting. JHAB typically features pop-up shops, public art, performance art, and hands-on workshops.

I'll let a member of a little theater group, Cogito, describe the welcome they found at T2F:

> T2F opened its doors to . . . Cogito, and allowed us to conduct workshops and rehearsals and put up fortnightly events free of charge and gave us the opportunity to do what we love, i.e. ENTERTAIN! We have since gone on to perform in Lahore and Islamabad but honestly, there is no place in Pakistan like T2F. It is unique in its environment and its purpose—a true cultural center. The best part is the welcoming nature of the people; nowhere else do strangers share tables and share their life stories. While conducting rehearsals at T2F, we met a writer from India who helped us with our script, an elderly doctor who told us about his youth and his passion for theater, musicians who became involved with our performances, and even some people who told us to be less loud. Artists like us are only good at what they do, so without the institutional support provided by forums such as T2F, we would also end up as bitter doctors who never pursued their passion. Thanks to T2F, we can keep on entertaining and hopefully pursue what we love! Thank you for everything!

T2F is proud to have instituted the Perween Rehman Lecture Series in memory of one of Pakistan's brightest lights. A renowned social worker, urban planner,

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and architect, Perween spent decades working on poverty alleviation projects with the guiding philosophy of *apni madad aap* (help yourself). On March 13, 2013, she was murdered by armed assailants while returning home from work. Her death has been mourned across Pakistan and the social development world. We instituted the lecture series to keep Perween's voice and legacy alive and to continue talking about the issues closest to her heart.

Earlier this year, T2F hosted and cosponsored Pakistan's first Civic Hackathon. Over a weekend, developers, designers, urban cartographers, data analysts, and problem-solvers came together to create web and mobile solutions to Pakistan's civic problems. These solutions, created in less than a day, ranged from crime mapping to emergency services and demonstrated the power of self-motivated doers who have had enough of complaining and want to use their skills and talent to build useful applications that can help citizens.

T2F offers space and guidance to the Debating Circuit, Karachi's first official debating collective. In sessions with students from a variety of educational institutions across the city, the group aims to break the oligopoly of debating excellence held by a few elite schools, and make debating more accessible. Its members win honors at public speaking events and debating tournaments. One of the founders said, "T2F's generosity has been instrumental in the functioning of The Debating Circuit since its inception. Our relationship had been based on a mutual respect for debating and differing points of view, and our objective was to further that in Karachi. We have slowly but surely gained traction, and we owe it all to T2F for giving us a centralized location to have our sessions, that too absolutely free."

T2F also provides space to Open Letters, a growing community of writers who host fortnightly writers' workshops where they read out and discuss their work.

Having an open mind and an open-door policy has let us fulfill dreams beyond my wildest imagination. When we were setting up T2F, one of my key ambitions was to blur the lines between disciplines and create programming that would attract a range of people irrespective of their specialties and disciplines. Since its inception six years ago, T2F has hosted over 600 events. Standup comedy, film screenings, talks, readings, meetups with poets and writers and thought leaders, concerts, programming workshops, art exhibitions, Skype sessions with exiled leaders and like-minded friends in India, corner meetings for independent political candidates, tributes to iconic thinkers and activists, symposia on culture and technology and society: a heady mix of the true liberal arts. I continue to derive immense pleasure when an artist shows up for a science talk or a techie says, "I come to T2F to exercise the right side of my brain."

We now have 23 staff members, a strong base of volunteers and interns, a number of partners and a loyal community of followers around the world. Approximately 95 people walk through our doors each day and thousands more follow us on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and the web. Our events are live streamed, live tweeted, and recorded for our archives and for sharing online.

Other ventures, inspired by T2F, have sprung up in Islamabad and Lahore. A youth café has just opened in Lyari, one of Karachi's most conflicted, troubled

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localities known for its gang wars. In interviews with the press, its founders said they are modeling it on T2F. We work closely with them and provide guidance, mentoring, and ideas to their young and dynamic leaders.

Our impact in Karachi is best measured by what its citizens have to say:

> Public Service Announcement: Sometimes one wishes that there was a T2F when one was growing up. #HappyBirthdayT2F.
>
> —HM Naqvi

> You have already done 50 years work in these five years.
>
> —Zeenia Shaukat

> Happy Birthday T2F. I can't imagine a Karachi without you, anymore.
>
> —Rabail Baig

> I don't just like The Second Floor, I LOVE it. You make me want to move back to Pakistan and join the movement. You are a space within a space within a space that I certainly dream of creating but didn't know it was possible to making a reality. Thank you for creating it and thank you for giving Pakistan substance and Pakistanis hope.
>
> —Sehr Karim Jaffer

> You and T2F have played an amazing role in all of our lives and the music that we do collectively.
>
> —Shahab Hussain

In the words of leading Pakistani peace activist and physics professor Pervez Hoodbhoy, "T2F is the only worthwhile arts and culture center in the city."

T2F has, slowly and organically, become the hub of artistic and intellectual activity that I had envisaged six years ago. While it has been a very difficult journey, it has been rewarding beyond my wildest imagination. If I had made a business plan, T2F would have not gone beyond the idea stage. It is still financially unstable, but the model is workable and replicable. By creating this space, I have had the honor and privilege of meeting hundreds of talented individuals who have renewed my faith in humanity. Many of them have become dear friends, coconspirators, and advisors, and I look forward to continuing this shared journey of creativity, rabble-rousing, and resistance.

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